

## *The Good Side of Kamma*

*September 6, 2009*

When I first went to stay with Ajaan Fuang, I asked him what we have to believe in order to meditate. He replied that there's one thing: the principle of kamma, that you choose your actions, and that your actions have results. After all, that's why we meditate, so that our choice of actions can be more skillful, and the results we get out of our actions will be better.

But a lot of us, when we come to meditation, especially here in the West, don't think about kamma or see that it has any real relevance to the meditation. Kamma seems to be a matter of past lives and future lives. Yet even though the Buddha did talk about kamma in those terms, each time he discussed past lives and future lives, the discussion always came back to the present moment. He'd be talking about cycles of the universe, the development and non-development of human race over vast stretches of time, and then he'd say that it all came from kamma, people's decisions, the choices they made as to what they were going to do, and say, and think.

And where does that happen? It happens right here, right now. The reason the larger cycles are so full of suffering is because our actions are unskillful, and our actions are so unskillful because we're not paying attention to what we're doing right here, right now.

So this is why we meditate, to pay more attention, to be clear about what's happening and in particular about what we're doing. As you stay with the breath, you're learning to be more mindful, more alert, and to put more effort into being skillful about what you're doing. You begin to see the results of skillful choices right here and now. Pay attention to the breath, stick with it, learning how to focus on it in a way that doesn't put too much pressure on it, so that you're not forcing it too much, or in a way that's not so loose that the mind keeps slipping away. You find just the right amount of focus, just the right amount of pressure to stay with the breath, to keep it smooth coming in and smooth going out, so that it feels just right going in and going out. This way, you begin to see the rewards of learning how to make skillful choices and developing those choices into real skills.

The Buddha had the advantage back his day that people coming to see him had already developed all kinds of skills: skills in running the household, skills in their work. As a member of the noble warrior class, he had to learn the skills of archery. They say the women in the noble warrior class had to learn the skills of surgery. Their husbands would come back from battles with arrows stuck in them, and the

women were the ones who had to get them out. So to survive in those days, you had to have a wide range of skills.

Our problem nowadays is that most people come to meditation with very little experience with manual skills. They don't have the psychology that comes from learning a skill. So if you do have a skill of some kind—a physical skill or manual skill—try to reflect back on the qualities of mind that helped you stick with it, learn from your actions, not get discouraged by setbacks, and—if you found things going well—how to keep pushing the envelope to make them better and better.

If this is your first exposure to a skill, keep those qualities of mind. Don't let yourself get discouraged. Don't let yourself get defeated. Just keep coming back, coming back, coming back, telling yourself, "There must be something to learn here, there must be something I can do here that I'm missing right now." Think about the instructions Ajaan Lee gave in the seven steps.

Then as you get a greater sense of mastery here with the breath, try to spread that around to the rest of your life, in your other choices about what you're going to do and say and think.

This is why it's helpful to have a positive sense of the teaching on kamma, and not a negative one. For most of us, when we hear about kamma, it sounds punitive. You did something bad, you're going to get punished. No wonder we don't like the idea. But for the Buddha, the importance of the teaching on kamma lay in its possibilities for freedom and happiness. When he would teach it, he taught it in terms of its positive connotations.

Starting with generosity: It's because we have choices that generosity has meaning. If we didn't have choices, if the world were just like a windup clock or windup toy, then people would be windup clocks and windup toys. If they gave something to you, it'd be like a windup toy carrying something over and plopping it down in front of you. It wouldn't have any meaning at all.

But it's because each person has the choice to do that or not to do that, that's why generosity has meaning. And you can see from yourself, the times when you've chosen to be generous. Try to think back to the first time you gave a gift that wasn't mandatory, i.e., it wasn't a Christmas present, it wasn't bar mitzvah present, it wasn't a birthday present. On a totally random day in the calendar, you saw something you had and you wanted to give it to somebody. You gave it, and it felt good. That's the kind of feeling you should have around the teaching on kamma.

The same with the teachings on gratitude: You realize that, to be kind, you have to go out of your way. It isn't the easiest thing in the world to be kind. Your

parents didn't throw you away the first time you started crying non-stop and making a terror of yourself. They got up in the middle of the night. They looked after you. Night after night after night, not because they had to, but because they wanted to, even though it was hard.

So you should have some gratitude for their choices. Again, if they were windup toys, there'd be no need for gratitude. If you're a windup toy, you wouldn't have to feel gratitude for anyone. But we're not windup toys. We're not totally determined. We do have choices in the present moment. Each present moment. So the feeling you have when you really feel gratitude or when someone shows gratitude to you: Learn to relate that feeling to the teaching on kamma.

A lot of our problem with kamma is that we don't have a sense of how to relate to it in an emotionally positive way. But when you think about it in terms of gratitude and generosity, you realize that this power we have to make choices is important. It's to be valued. You want to protect it. You want to train it.

As for the knowledge that we've done unskillful things in the past, the Buddha said the proper way of thinking about that is that as soon as you realize it's unskillful, you make up your mind you're going to refrain from it, you're not going to make that mistake again. That's it. As he says, feelings of remorse over the mistake, strong feelings of guilt, the feeling you see in a dog when it knows it's done something wrong, gets on its back, and wags its tail, hoping you'll forgive it: That's not the kind of reaction the Buddha advocates. Because if you let remorse take over, then you feel more negative about yourself, and because you don't like these negative feelings, that causes you to do more unskillful things. This is why people who go to drink, they go to drugs: to wipe out those negative feelings. Just remember: You're an honorable human being. You've recognized a mistake and you resolve not repeat it. That's the best that can be expected of a human being.

Then the Buddha says to develop thoughts of goodwill—goodwill for yourself, goodwill for all the people around you—as a way of strengthening your resolve not to act in an unskillful way.

Again, goodwill has meaning because of kamma. Goodwill becomes our motivation to do things in a skillful way. If we were windup toys, goodwill would be superfluous. Or if our actions had no impact on anybody, goodwill again would be superfluous. It wouldn't have any meaning. But we know that we have choices and we want to make sure that our choices are skillful. That means keeping this in mind: You don't want to do anything harmful. You don't want to hurt yourself; you don't want to hurt other people. You want to look for happiness that doesn't have to cause people to suffer.

So this is why we meditate: It's because our actions are important. And to get our hands around the teaching on kamma, it also helps to get our heart around it. Have some positive feelings toward this teaching on kamma. It's not there just to punish you. It's there to offer you opportunities. It's there to remind you that your actions are important. And even though you've done unskillful things in the past, you've got a new opportunity right now to do something skillful. And then again right now. Each right now.

So if you do find yourself in the middle of having made some unfortunate choices, you can say, "Well, I'll stop." And the fact that you stopped becomes positive kamma right there. Part of the mind may say, "You've been doing unskillful things in the past, you're going to give in to unskillful impulses in the future., so why bother resisting now?" Fight that. You've got to fight it. And you have the freedom to fight it. That's the important part of our kamma: that element of freedom.

All of these good things associate with the teaching on kamma: gratitude, generosity, goodwill, freedom. So keep those positive associations in mind.

As for the complexities of the teaching, they have to do in the working out. We're planting seeds here. The way the seeds are going to grow will depend on all the other seeds in the field. Some seeds will crowd other seeds out, sprout faster. You have no control over what seeds you planted in the past, but you do have control over the seeds you're planting right now. You have control over the seeds you're watering right now. Which is why we're meditating right now, and the meditation gets us to stay in the right now, so that regardless of what's already there in your field, you know that what you're doing right now is skillful. It's done with clarity, it's done with mindfulness and alertness, heedfulness.

This is another one of those qualities that wouldn't have any meaning if our actions weren't important and you didn't have freedom to choose your actions. So learn to think about the Buddha's teachings of heedfulness in a positive way as well. On the one hand, you're aware of the dangers of acting in unskillful ways, but you're also aware of the opportunity you have to be skillful, and your skillful actions really can make a difference. They are important. This is why we're meditating, because this is a heedful thing to do and the skillful thing to do. An important thing to do. It helps us to be more heedful and skillful in all our other activities as well.